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Something borrowed, something blue: Bluebeard dismembers romance in Australasia and beyond

ABSTRACT

This article surveys a range of relatively recent works in which the Bluebeard figure of fairy tale appears to cut to the paradoxical 'heart' of the mythology of romantic love in popular culture. Creative practitioners in Australasia and beyond are using the sinister figure of Bluebeard to critique romantic mythology, probing, in particular, the fraught intersection of love, knowledge and artistry. In the works of Jane Campion, Nick Cave, Sarah Quigley and others, Bluebeard comes to signify the violence that can accompany the lover and/as artist's attempts to define the self through the other and the other through the self. In recent times, Bluebeard and his wife are doubled in their pursuit of penetrative knowledge of the other in the name of love, and this romantic quest is here equated with an erasure of the beloved's subjectivity and the reduction of love's potential. Bluebeard, in the hands of these predominately female creators, lends himself to an exploration of the contemporary dilemmas of love, encouraging us to question the demands we make of each other and ourselves in the realm of romance. This article focuses on Bluebeard in recent Australasian works read in an international and historical context.

KEYWORDS

Bluebeard
fairy tale
romantic love
narrative
dismemberment
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The figure of Bluebeard, and the narratives associated with him, share many affinities with Gothic romance. Bluebeard also lends himself to a critique of the mythology of romantic love with which fairy tales such as Cinderella and Snow White have become synonymous. Bluebeard begins where other fairy tales finish, unlocking the door of 'happily-ever-after' to reveal a bloody chamber: the messiness of human relations elided by that glib final phrase of the classic fairy tale. The most famous and enduring version of the Bluebeard tale in the western tradition was committed to print by Charles Perrault in 1697, but there is no singular or original Bluebeard; like other fairy tales it derives from a shifting set of stories of folk origin. The works in this article are not Bluebeard adaptations or revisions but texts in which Bluebeard interacts with other popular fairy tale elements to reveal contradictory cultural investments in romantic love. Their creators give the Bluebeard figure new and varied meanings that speak to contemporary social dilemmas, an approach that resonates with the tale's heterogeneous, matrilineal origins. Fairy tale scholar Marina Warner notes 'the porousness of stories to their tellers' temper and beliefs' (1995: 255). Bluebeard proves to be highly malleable in the hands of these contemporary writers and film-makers, open to different and even contradictory moral slants.

Bluebeard lurks in the shadows of popular culture. The serial killer, the collector, the obsessive lover are his modern incarnations (Warner 1995: 269). He turns up as a perversely puritanical writer or artist in some texts, while incarnating romantic mythology as a literal 'lady killer' in works such as Jane Campion's *In the Cut* (2003). Unsurprisingly, his gruesome story has fallen out of favour as a children's soporific tale, and Disney are unlikely to make an animated version. The works in this article owe more to the Bluebeards of Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood than to Perrualt. It is worth, however, briefly summarizing the plot of Perrault's classic Bluebeard fairy tale.

Bluebeard is a mysterious, wealthy nobleman who wants a wife, but his suspect past and repellent blue beard make it difficult for him to find one. He finally convinces a peasant girl to marry him, and shortly after the wedding announces that he has business to attend to elsewhere. He gives his new bride the keys to every room in his castle and tells her that she can roam freely so long as she does not enter one small room. Once alone, the young wife cannot contain her curiosity. She soon finds herself opening the door to the forbidden chamber, where she makes the grisly discovery of the mutilated corpses of Bluebeard's seven previous wives. (In Perrault's story, the wives' corpses are decapitated and hung from the walls, while in the Grimms' version of the tale they are entirely dismembered.) She drops the key to the chamber in shock and it becomes stained by the blood and gore on the chamber floor. Bluebeard returns unexpectedly and demands to see the key that betrays his wife's disobedience. As punishment, she must join the other brides in the bloody chamber, and so the bodies accumulate (although why the first wife was murdered remains a mystery). Bluebeard prepares to decapitate his wife but, in Perrault's version of the tale, in the nick of time her brothers appear with their swords and kill the tyrant. In the Grimms' Bluebeard variant 'Fitcher's Bird', the girl rescues herself through cunning disguises, 'remembering' the corpses of her sisters in the process. In most versions of the tale, the heroine inherits her husband's riches and marries a better man, suggesting the persistence of faith in marriage based on 'realist' values.

The early tale had little to do with romantic love in its current conception: it was more likely concerned with matters of material gain and physical

survival. Interpretations of the tale's meaning are many and varied. Shuli Barzilai (2005), for instance, takes issue with Bruno Bettelheim's influential psychoanalytic reading of Bluebeard as a tale of repressed female sexuality. She also counters Warner's socio-historical interpretation of the tale as expressing women's fear of death in childbirth (though this is only one of several possible meanings Warner offers). Barzilai proposes that the Bluebeard tale expresses the basic need to outlive, outwit or overturn a regime of abuse and domination, which she terms, after Margaret Atwood, 'survivorhood' (2005: 253–54). This article is concerned not with the 'original' meaning of the tale – which, as Warner notes, cannot be divorced from the context of its telling (1995: xii) – but with how and why Bluebeard, as a roving, renegade figure, is borrowed to critique contemporary popular romantic mythology.

Like other folk and fairy tales, Bluebeard's fortunes wax and wane depending on how it might speak to contemporary social circumstances. Bluebeard has survived primarily in the Gothic romance. Feminist-oriented analyses of romantic love, horror and the body in Gothic fiction provide several 'keys' to Bluebeard's endurance.

Gothic romance is an important strand in the current discourse of romantic love, and the interweaving of love and horror plots in the Gothic idiom is particularly relevant to a critique of romantic mythology based on images of dismemberment. It has been convincingly argued by a range of critics that Gothic plots and images have always been used to critique as well as to reiterate dominant conceptions of romantic love, and that the Gothic genre is particularly apt for illustrating the dangers of romantic identity for women. Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* ([1847] 1987), Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* ([1938] 1962), and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* ([1966] 2001) have all been read as critical of the romantic paradigm of their respective eras, and some critics detect transgressive elements in female-penned texts since the Gothic's inception as a literary genre in the late eighteenth century. Susanne Becker, for instance, asserts that as early as Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) the happy ending is implicitly questioned, while in modernist Gothic such as Wide Sargasso Sea love is depicted as a 'deadly appropriation of the other' (1996: 76).

Studies of the 'grotesque' and 'unruly' Gothic body by Kelly Hurley (1996), Pamela Gilbert (1997) and others are useful for understanding the challenge posed to romantic mythology by images of physical dismemberment. The trope of dismemberment confronts a particular humanist model of integral selfhood and the conventional, seamless narrative form on which romantic mythology relies. The dismembered body parts in Bluebeard's chamber bear testimony, then, to the repeated failure to achieve mythic self-wholeness through romantic love.

A related problem that emerges at the intersection of the dominant humanist model of integral selfhood and current romantic mythology is what Dominic Pettman calls 'the trauma of the second love' (2006: 29). Repetition-compulsion is a well-theorized aspect of the Gothic romance. Through its repeated destruction and reformulation of the romantic couple, Bluebeard renders the loved object infinitely substitutable, challenging the romantic ideal of the singular merging of souls. The sheer number of bodies in Bluebeard's chamber (seven, in most versions of the tale), as much as their dismembered state, threatens the construction of a unique and integral self. As Warner notes: 'the seriality of the dead wives also marks their anonymity, their interchangeability, the failure of stable subjectivity' (1995: 271). The serial aspect of

the Bluebeard tale has been used in postmodern renditions to highlight the threat to the identities of lover, beloved and love itself, when confronted with the spectacle of love's promiscuous nature.

Bluebeard's depiction of 'serial monogamy' acquires particular significance in the current social context (Lurie 2005: 129), where the phenomenon of divorce and remarriage testifies both to the endurance of the romantic ideal and its repeated failure. Confronting their husband's former loves, the women in the works considered here cannot remain blind to their contingent position as loved object. They are challenged to relinquish the self-enclosed fantasy worlds in which their love dramas thrive and see themselves within a broader cultural context. Michelle A. Masse, in her study of the imbrications of love and horror plots in Gothic fiction, contends that it is the liminal position of the spectator that allows the heroine 'to recognize the Gothic as systemic abuse rather than an individual love story' (1992: 8). The degree of empathy or recognition a heroine experiences on witnessing the former loves, and the way that this discovery reorients her relation to her 'own' love story, are central to reframing Bluebeard as an anti-romantic fairy tale.

Bluebeard in the past two centuries has been used to figure the redemptive power of love as well as its potential blindness. Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) and the novel on which it is based seem to typify the redemptive Bluebeard tale, as the heroine's emphatic love for Mr de Winter, her unshakeable belief in his goodness, despite so much evidence to the contrary, transforms him into the man she imagines him to be. But it is really Rebecca's story, as the title suggests. Rebecca laughs in the face of love, mocks both her husband and her lovers. Her former housekeeper, Mrs Danvers, reports that 'she used to lie on her bed and rock with laughter at the lot of you'. Rebecca is punished by death for her transgressions against the sacred institution of love. The romantic ambivalence evident in this classic twentieth century Bluebeard tale comes to the fore in more recent retellings, as contemporary creative practitioners put yet another spin on the intertwining of love and death in popular culture.

DEADLY (UN)CERTAINTIES: THE PROBLEM OF LOVE AND KNOWLEDGE IN POSTMODERN BLUEBEARD

Maria Tatar, in *Secrets beyond the Door*, identifies curiosity, secrecy and 'women's problematic relationship to knowledge' as the defining characteristics of the Bluebeard tale (2004: 3). The story turns, she suggests, on 'the quest for intimacy through knowledge' (2004: 6). In her analysis of *Jane Eyre* ([1847] 1987) and *Rebecca* ([1938] 1962), Tatar reads the Bluebeard tale as staging 'the play between intimacy and distance, between disclosure and repression' in the realm of romantic love (2004: 8). Tatar traces this theme through the transposition of the Bluebeard plot from page to screen in 1940s Hollywood films such as George Cuckor's *Gaslight* (1944) and Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946), where romantic love and marriage are depicted, for women at least, as isolation or entrapment with an unknown other. (In current romantic relations no one is a 'clean slate' and Bluebeard's wife also tends to come with a secret past, as we will see.)

In contemporary Bluebeard tales, the use of Gothic and thriller plots preoccupied with what can and cannot be known builds the death-dealing quest for ultimate knowledge of the other into the structure of the romance narrative itself. Bluebeard's chamber comes to contain the evidence of the repetitious mutilation that results from the quest to determine the authenticity of

the other, a quest that ironically succeeds in collapsing the other into a pile of 'meaningless' parts. The drive for definitive knowledge of the other's interior can become a quest for death as the only way to annul the distance and difference of the beloved, as feminist critic Toril Moi (1999) suggests in her essay on Thomas's version of the paradigmatic romantic narrative *Tristan* (*c.* 1150). The ultimate meaning of the beloved can be fixed only in death, and the quest to capture the other in the name of love has been represented by Angela Carter (1996: 72), Roland Barthes ([1978] 2002: 71), and others as a surgical dissection or dismemberment in the service of the lovers' own identity.

In recent popular Bluebeard tales, as in the horror and thriller genres generally, the striving for total knowledge of, and identification with, the other is not a loving or neutral enterprise: it is figured in grotesque images of violence and violation. In Jonathan Demme's hugely influential 1991 film *The Silence of the Lambs* (based on Thomas Harris's 1988 novel), for example, horror is intimately connected to the desire to get inside the skin of another. Buffalo Bill is a transvestite who kills to make himself a suit of female skin, seeking literally to inhabit his feminine other, while Hannibal Lector is a cannibal psychologist famed and feared for his abilities to penetrate other people psychologically, thus inhabiting them in mind.

In the postmodern Bluebeard, the lover's thwarted quest for knowledge is often a solipsistic manoeuvre that seeks not so much to understand the other as to contain the threat their opacity poses to the lover's own identity. The lover labours not to discover the beloved, but to confirm pre-existing expectations in which they are already heavily invested. Joyce Carol Oates, American author of multiple Bluebeard tales, suggests that the grotesque in art, in all its varied manifestations, is at heart an exploration of alterity, an acknowledgement that 'all others are, in the deepest sense, *strangers*' (1994: 303, original emphasis). In these works, the quest for ultimate knowledge in the name of love is subverted as the body in death asserts an incoherent materiality in the face of the lover's transcendent aspirations. Bluebeard, in the works that follow, exposes the epistemological unease that frequently underlies and undermines romantic aspirations of unity and transparency.

JANE CAMPION: 'DISARTICULATING' ROMANTIC MYTHOLOGY

Australian auteur Jane Campion's acclaimed Victorian Gothic, *The Piano* (1993), is considered an exemplary postmodern Bluebeard tale by fairy tale scholars Cristina Bacchilega (1997) and Maria Tatar (2004). Campion's self-conscious reworking of the tale is highlighted by its performance as a pantomime within the film's diegesis. Bacchilega and Tatar analyse the film in terms of a conflict between Ada's aural, immersive mode, and the 'acquisitional' visual and linguistic culture of her Bluebeard husband. Embodied knowledge, in Campion's film world, is better able to encompass the complexities of romantic relations. Campion returns to these themes, and to the Bluebeard tale, a decade later, in the serial-killer thriller *In the Cut* (2003), based on Susanna Moore's novel ([1995] 2004).

In the Cut restages the confrontation between categorical knowledge and sensual experience 'played out' in *The Piano*. In both films, Campion rejects a 'blind' reliance on sight at the expense of the felt senses, implicitly critiquing her own mode of representation and the tight visual control it implies. Like other recent Bluebeard stories, *The Piano* and *In the Cut* portray the potential violence of verbal language as it falters in the face of embodied experience.

Both films confront the failure of popular narratives of romance to save or redeem, while retaining a sense of the 'hopefulness of desire', to borrow a phrase from Elaine Jordan in reference to the writings of Angela Carter (1994: 199). Unlike its critically acclaimed predecessor, *In the Cut* has received little scholarly attention, yet there is much in the film worth examining.

Campion's adaption of *In the Cut* is in many ways faithful to the plot of Moore's novel, though it dramatically alters Moore's tragic denouement, in which the first person narrator describes her dismemberment with piercing clarity and excruciating physical detail. Campion's film centres on Frannie Avery, a single woman in her mid-30s living in post 9/11 New York's East Village. Frannie teaches creative writing at NYU and is compiling a book on slang. The noir narrative is initiated when Frannie stumbles on an oral sex scene in the basement of a seedy bar. The faces of both participants are obscured, but Frannie sees a tattoo of the three of spades on the man's wrist. A short time later a detective turns up at her apartment investigating the murder of a young woman. The woman was 'disarticulated', Detective Malloy explains, and a part of her body was found in Frannie's garden. The detective, Frannie notices, has a tattoo of the three of spades on his wrist. He asks her out for a drink and she, with some trepidation, accepts. The rest of the film charts the fraught development of their romantic relationship within the trajectory of the serial-killer plot.

While Frannie moves around the city collecting scraps of language that appeal to her poetic sensibilities, Detective Malloy seeks similarly scattered clues as to the killer's identity. But in the latter half of the film, after it has been revealed that the woman in the basement fellatio scene was the same one who was dismembered, Malloy himself becomes a suspect. The killer turns out to be Malloy's police partner Rodriguez, who has the same tattoo. A contemporary Bluebeard who mock-romances his victims with sentimental ballads and leaves his 'signature' engagement ring on their severed hands, Rodriguez continues his killing spree, strewing body parts around the city. His third victim is Frannie's half-sister Pauline, and the fourth is about to be Frannie herself, but she shoots him dead in a final showdown in a lighthouse outside the city. She returns to Malloy whom she had left hand-cuffed to the radiator in her apartment after mistaking him for the killer.

In forensic terminology, to 'disarticulate' is to amputate a bone at the joint. Frannie records the word in her notebook, presumably appreciating the punning association between speech and dismemberment. Her 'passion', as she puts it to Malloy, is language, and she is particularly interested in language at the intersection of sex and violence. 'Slang is either sexual or violent', she informs Pauline, in reference to the list of slang words pinned to her apartment wall, most of which, like the 'cut' of the film's title, are synonyms for female genitals. ('Or both', Pauline replies.) Through her linguistic investigations, Frannie attempts both to contact and contain the operations of power and desire, not only in street slang but in the realms of poetry, literature and the imagination. In response to one of Pauline's disastrous romantic entanglements, Frannie asks: 'You ever think about just imagining sex?' 'Kinda boring', Pauline replies. This may indicate a lack of imagination on Pauline's part, but it also suggests Frannie's reluctance to risk her limits in actual embodied connection. Frannie uses ironic speech as a shield against intimacy in a world where the very words rising from the city streets threaten her with bodily harm.

As previously noted, Moi examines the problem of language and the opacity of the beloved in relation to courtly love (1999: 417). In the courtly context, as

in film noirs, the problem of love and knowledge is projected onto the body of woman, who is consequently constructed as a deceptive surface to be sadistically plundered. Woman, and her capacity for betrayal, is of course central to the Bluebeard tale, and Frannie, like Ada in *The Piano*, is a particularly opaque character. Kathleen McHugh observes that 'Frannie's passion for language derives especially from its capacity to produce double meanings' (2007: 132). Accordingly, Frannie's speech is sharp and ironic, full of metaphor, wit and poetic allusion. She actively resists the clichés that would lull the lover/killer/viewer into the comforting belief that he or she can access her consciousness. Her student and suitor Cornelius remarks, with a mixture of frustration and fascination: 'You never speak. It's always just jive'. Detective Malloy, unlike the courtly or Barthesian lovers for whom love is a discursive performance, speaks in a bluntly physical manner: he is not seduced by language, nor does he attempt to seduce with it. This contrasts sharply to Rodriguez, whose romantic rhetoric is punctured by homophobia and misogyny, exposing a fear of otherness that his smooth dialogue cannot quite conceal.

Philosopher Karmen MacKendrick contends that 'revelation is implicit in the cutting open of the body, whether to the depths or only to the dermal layer' (2004: 134). In Campion's *In the Cut*, the trope of dismemberment reveals the circularity of the lover's quest to know and contain the other, when concealed in Bluebeard's chamber is the evidence of a self-ever-becoming-other through its numerous unstable interactions with an 'outside world'. MacKendrick writes of how communication, both physical and linguistic, 'requires an impossible intersection of impenetrable surfaces – that requires that we be cut open' (2004: 140). In *In the Cut*, this 'intersection' requires a rupturing of language and narrative form and a concomitant re-evaluation of subjectivity. 'Disarticulation' here, implies the need pull apart inherited stories that underlie the experience of romantic love in contemporary western culture, re-evaluating their usefulness and discarding that which no longer serves us.

Campion emphasizes this point by staging a second, more explicit Bluebeard story within the film text, as she does in *The Piano*. This is the malign enchantment of Frannie's mother's courtship story, which surfaces in dream-like flashbacks throughout the film, at first idyllic and finally violent as Frannie's mother's legs are severed by her father's skate blade. As Frannie tells this courtship story to Pauline, her mother, who is young, beautiful and intoxicated with the romance of ice skating for the first time, accepts the ring of a man she meets on the lake, a man who is handsome, charming and totally unknown to her. 'And at that exact moment, which is something my mother always added, the snow began to fall'. Frannie gently mocks the clichéd elements of her mother's story, while pointing to its very real consequences: 'It killed her. When he left she just went crazy with grief, you know. She didn't understand it, she just couldn't believe it'. She could not understand it, the film implies, because abandonment has no place in her naïve mythology of romantic love. Frannie's father is another Bluebeard figure, married four times and 'already plotting the fifth'. ('He never married my mother', Pauline points out.)

Frannie is clear-eyed about how poorly the simplistic romantic narrative equipped her mother for the realities of her relationship but she fails to recognize the extent to which it still holds her in its sway. Sepia tones give the inset tale an appropriately nostalgic, mythical aesthetic and a self-consciously cinematic feel: romance is portrayed as a product of representation. Frannie does not really believe the story, but the fact that it surfaces most often in the space between sleep and waking suggests that its influence is largely

unconscious, and it will continue to exert a shaping power on her experience until it is excavated. The fact that it is very much her mother's story (although her father is the star) indicates women's complicity with romantic scripts. The embedded narrative highlights the importance of critically engaging with existing stories of romantic love in reshaping heterosexual relations, as Frannie's struggle to see her way clear of her mother's mythology mirrors Campion's interrogation of fairy tale romance through her manipulation of the Bluebeard tale.

(There is a great moment in the documentary of the making of *Portrait of a Lady* where veteran actress Shelly Winters says to Campion: 'You're a true director: a sadist'. Campion says: 'Cut'. Campion seems aware of the irony that, as an author of romances, she partakes of the very power she questions.)

Campion's films underscore the importance of creating love stories that we can actually live, although these may not be the stories that are most conceptually, rhetorically or poetically satisfying to us. *In the Cut* encourages us to be wary of a love story that is too aesthetically pleasing, as her Bluebeard figures exploit seductive scripts and the real desire for connectedness that underlies them. The way in which aestheticism can render destructive love relations palatable, and the potentially sadistic aspects of creative expression, are highlighted in the works that follow, where Bluebeard himself is a consummate artist.

INSPIRED BY BLUEBEARD: LOVE, ART AND SINISTER CELEBRITY

Tatar notes that Bluebeard has become 'a powerful model for the artist who must preserve and nourish his creative energies by killing the beloved, thereby shielding himself against the depleting effects of intimacy' (2004: 152). Postmodern Bluebeard is often an aesthete, a collector of beautiful things (including women), an artist or writer. Romantic love, as in Campion's films, is depicted as utterly entwined with its representations. The Marquis in Carter's story 'The Bloody Chamber', inspired by Sade, is an influential example of a Bluebeard whose aestheticism glamorizes sadomasochistic relations. Bluebeard's romantic arsenal is his voluptuous poetic imagery in Oates's Bluebeard novella *Beasts* ([2003] 2004), while the ex-husband in Susanna Moore's *In the Cut* ([1995] 2004) is a fashion photographer famous for 'that series of photographs of murdered Bengali child prostitutes that had been turned into art postcards' ([1995] 2004: 11). If these modern-day Bluebeards attempt to control human relations through the act of representation, they also use artistry to fortify the self against the perceived vulnerability associated with the embodied experience of love: to keep the messiness of the flesh at pen's or lens' length.

The potentially oppressive aspect of artistic dedication to one's beloved is captured in *A Lover's Discourse* (Roland Barthes [1978] 2002). Barthes writes:

> There is no benevolence within writing, rather a terror: it smothers the other, who, far from perceiving the gift in it, reads there instead an assertion of mastery, of power, of pleasure, of solitude. Whence the cruel paradox of the dedication: I seek at all costs to give you what smothers you.
>
> ([1978] 2002: 78–79)

A similar sentiment infuses more recent and popular renderings of romantic love. Contemporary Australian veteran of the (often twisted) love ballad Nick

Cave recognizes the love lyric as a bid for control of both the beloved and the love. His lecture, 'The Love Song' (1999), celebrates the love song as a sadistic form and emphasizes its compulsive character. In this lecture, Cave presents an analysis of Australian pop star Kylie Minogue's tellingly titled song 'Better the Devil You Know' as an example of 'the disclosing or disguising of the terror of love in a piece of mindless, innocuous pop music'. This song disingenuously exposes the sadomasochistic tendency of romantic relations, Cave argues, suggesting 'that all love relationships are by nature abusive and that this abuse, be it physical or psychological, is welcomed and encouraged' (1999).

Cave goes on to describe himself as suffering from 'erotographomania': the obsessive desire to write love letters. And he is in eminent company: recent studies of both Sigmund Freud (Breger 2000) and Franz Kafka (Begley 2008) suggest that they suffered from the same disorder, writing letters 'compulsively and copiously' to their fiancés (Smith 2008: 82). Both the love letter and the love song express an urge to shorten the distance between the lover and the beloved, Cave states. Possessing a power and permanence beyond the spoken word, both love song and letter have 'the potential to reinvent, through words, like Pygmalion with his self-created love of stone, one's beloved' (1999). He adds as an aside, in a version of the lecture delivered at the Southbank Centre, London: 'Me, I'd never trust a woman who writes letters' (1999). Cave depicts the artist in love with love itself, with its language and aesthetic expression. As in Pettman's earlier analysis, the loved object is ever changing and in this sense irrelevant; the beloved's subjective uniqueness is undermined by the very romantic discourse that would seem to affirm it. As noted, the trope of seriality is a key aspect of how the Bluebeard tale lends itself to a critique of contemporary romantic relations marked by the phenomenon of divorce and remarriage – a timeless script in which the players come and go.

Twentieth century Bluebeards such as Kurt Vonnegut's Rabo Karabekian or Vladimir Nabokov's Humbert Humbert enable their authors to reflect, like Cave, on the egocentricity of the creative process where it intersects, most perilously, with romantic relations. In Vonnegut's (1987) and Nabokov's *Lolita* ([1955] 1995), as in Cave's analysis, art becomes (among other things) an attempt to remake the world, and most especially the beloved, to one's own narcissistic satisfaction. Objects of beauty in their own right, these novels highlight the futility of this controlling approach to romantic relations, as the acts of artistic creation intended to bring the other closer (while also keeping them safely contained) cause these more subtle Bluebeards to feel their isolation most acutely. They are tormented, like the Barthesian lover, by the awareness that the more language they throw at the other the more obscure the other becomes: hence the profusion of words, the excessive and compulsive quality of the representations.

In contrast to the often disingenuous female narrators of postmodern Bluebeard tales, the Bluebeard figures in male-penned texts tend to be overtly self-aware, analysing the pathology of their own behaviour for their readers' benefit, just as Cave theorizes the oppressive aspects of his art. After his first sexual encounter with the girl, Humbert Humbert remarks early in *Lolita* that 'Lolita has been safely solipsized' ([1955] 1995: 60). In this moment he manages to elide both her banality and her obscurity. But the illusion shatters almost immediately:

> What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita – perhaps more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her;

> floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness – indeed, no life of her own.
>
> ([1955] 1995: 62)

Humbert admits the life-denying aspects of his romantic idealization of Lolita. He understands that his fantasy image of the girl hovers between them, precluding his ever knowing Lolita as she is to herself, but this knowledge does not prevent him from obsessively pursuing his 'creation'. As Isadora Wing, anti-heroine of Erica Jong's bestselling portrayal of female romanticism in conflict with an incipient feminist consciousness (*Fear of Flying*, [1973] 2004), laments: 'I know but my knowing doesn't change anything. Why doesn't my knowing ever change anything?' ([1973] 2004: 275). Like Campion's Frannie, Wing's romanticism is aesthetically inculcated, absorbed through the high art of her upbringing and the psychoanalytic scripts that dominate her marriage.

The desire to capture the beloved once-and-for-all is literally equated with the violence of artistry in Oates's 'The High School Sweetheart: A Mystery'. The minimal, generic titles of the stories in the collection, *Faithless: Tales of Transgression* (2001) – 'The Vampire', 'The Stalker', 'Ugly', 'Lover' – emphasize the fact that these are tales, with the feel of folklore or urban legend. 'The High School Sweetheart' is a grotesque hybrid of Bluebeard and Sleeping Beauty in which a 15-year-old boy – 'brainy, and lonely, and given to irony' (2001: 340) – poisons the unknowing object of his adolescent fantasies because he feels victimized by his obsessive love for her. She exists for him 'in a rarefied dimension, like a specimen of some beautiful creature' (2001: 341), so he cannot believe that he could do her real harm. This boy goes on to be a highly successful writer of popular 'yet literary' mystery novels, in which he compulsively reiterates the initial murder mystery:

> And sometimes, even after decades of effort, R_ lost his way, and despaired. For there was something of horror in the lifelong contemplation of *mystery*; a sick, visceral helplessness that must be transformed into control, and *mastery*. And so R_ never gave up any challenge, however difficult. 'To give up is to confess you're mortal, and must die'.
>
> (2001: 337, original emphasis)

The violence of a kind of authorship that attempts to master mortality, mystery and meaninglessness is reiterated by American novelist Lydia Millet, whose Bluebeard figure 'feels a fleeting urge of savagery, almost of self-expression' (1998: 246). Millet's Bluebeard kills precisely because he is romantic: he can't bear the way the bodies of his wives debase the romantic ideal, perpetually reminding him of mediocrity, flesh, death.

> My wives: when I touch them they begin to disappear. Oh, not their eyes; not their legs, not their armpits, stomachs or breasts. These things stay. They stay too much. […] But they disappear. What they could be is lost. What they are is the residue.
>
> (1998: 232)

It is the fall of transcendent aspiration into materiality that Bluebeard here finds intolerable. At first he sees himself elevated in the eyes of his beloved, but finally he sees himself diminished, 'a dwarf', and is 'inspired' to sadistic violence. But we should not be too quick to condemn Bluebeard, Millet warns,

for 'the egocentrism of the romantic is no more remarkable than that of the so-called well-adjusted person' (1998: 237). Bluebeard is the apotheosis of a ruthless individualism that rejects social contract and compromise and thus represents a romantic, misanthropic ideal of artistic freedom: 'Blue Beard retains his charm by being what most men and women feel they cannot be: an overt articulator of the private fantasy of egomania. […] he is the subject that takes itself for a god' (1998: 243).

While the serial killer, in postmodern Bluebeard tales such as *In the Cut* ([1995] 2004), incarnates the violence of romantic mythology, he is himself arguably a mythic, romanticized figure. David Schmid, in his recent study *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture* (2005) argues compellingly that the serial killer has achieved enormous status in American life, inspiring the mixture of condemnation and admiration that characterizes celebrity. Mark Seltzer similarly describes the serial killer as 'one of the superstars of our wound culture' (1998: 2). In Hannibal Lector and Dexter (the 'good' serial killer of the television series of the same name), the serial killer presents an uncompromising, perversely puritanical force in popular representation. The fascination that the serial killer currently exerts supports Millet's contention that Bluebeard's desire for omnipotence is an extension of the egotism of the 'ordinary' western subject, both male and female. Bluebeard and his wife often exist in a doubled relationship, each seeking knowledge of and power over the other (Bacchilega 1997: 111). That Bluebeard's wife is prone to many of the same issues that afflict her husband is evident in the following texts.

Bluebeard operates alongside other mythic and fairy tale figures to powerful effect in two short works by New Zealanders Sarah Quigley and Alison Maclean. 'He kept his ex-wife in a teapot above the stove' (1998: 8) is the opening line of Quigley's story 'North of the Lights' (1998). It is a photograph of his ex-wife, but this is enough to unmoor the narrator Greta from the imagined certainties of her marital relations. In this story, Bluebeard's wife is the artist, an illustrator of children's books who spends her time in the world of fairy tale, while her journalist husband prides himself on his hard-nosed rationality. Greta's husband Alec is rather indifferent and preoccupied, but there is no evidence that he is still infatuated with his first wife Isobel, nor has any horrific fate befallen her. In fact, the photograph confronts Greta with the fraudulent nature of her own identity, the aspects of herself that she has repressed in order to marry her husband:

> The past that I had buried ten fathoms deep, hastily, furtively, wiping my hands clean: or so I thought. But Isobel saw the remains of clay beneath my fingernails: she, with her sharp and shining eyes.
>
> (1998: 11)

In this Bluebeard tale, the wife is the one with the secret past. By marrying her husband, Greta has attempted to remake herself, but Isobel reminds her that no one is a clean slate, and this knowledge eventually unravels the marriage. As in the Bluebeard tales of Atwood, Carter, Oates and Campion, Bluebeard and his wife are doubled and the revelation of Alec's secret is equivalent to the revelation of Greta's own. Isobel unleashes all the messiness and complication that Greta and Alec have each in their different ways denied.

Greta has sustained the fiction of perfect romantic sufficiency through the very fairy tale images (Cinderella, Red Riding Hood) that now turn against

her, mocking her romantic aspirations, much as Frannie's mother's courtship story taunts Frannie with a romanticism she would not openly acknowledge in *In the Cut* ([1995] 2004). Now the ugly stepsister, Greta reflects: 'I pruned my past without compassion, severed my bleeding toes to cram them into my chosen slipper' (Quigley 1998: 12). Volatile and multivalent, these old stories speak much more than Greta, or Frannie, would like to hear. Alec, like Millet's Bluebeard, seeks control or 'absolute mastery' (as Greta puts it) of all that is unknown and uncertain, through a framework of rigid rationality that is untouched by his wife's increasingly bizarre behaviour.

Isobel's power to destabilize Greta's identity is exacerbated by the fact that Greta has staked her identity entirely in her marriage, amputating anything that does not fit. Alec's relentless rationality renders him opaque and impenetrable, to both the reader and his wife. This is especially problematic because, having stripped herself of history, family, friends, Greta's sense of self is completely contingent on her husband and their 'gingerbread villa': 'Through the mating of our possessions, my new identity had been born. I had created a brave new nature for myself, with fragments chipped from my lover's side' (Quigley 1998: 9).

In the marriage of Greta and Alec we again see staged the contest of different ways of knowing that is so central to Campion's Bluebeard tales. Greta's husband, like most postmodern Bluebeards, deals in absolute precision, bending the material world and indeed his own marriage to his will, blind to anything that exceeds it. Lying awake at night, worrying about Isobel and what she means, Greta observes of Alec:

> In sleep he lost the absolute mastery he had over the physical world. His fingers, so deft in the daylight hours and in the long slow evenings when they wielded a pen with the ruthlessness of a surgeon – these fingers would now twitch loosely on my skin.
>
> (Quigley 1998: 8)

The image of a surgeon ruthlessly cutting intersects with similar images in Campion's films, images that also evoke the perceived aggression of definitive truth claims and the violence of categorical language. The famously severed finger in *The Piano* 'speaks' to this, as do the dismembered, bagged and neatly labelled body parts in *In the Cut*.

As noted, Bluebeard's (and his wife's) inquisitional approach to romantic relations is both necessitated and thwarted by the fact that the beloved is so central to one's own identity, as is clearly the case for Quigley's narrator. Again, Greta and Alec are doubled in their attempts to lay definitive claim to one another. If Alec possesses 'the ruthlessness of a surgeon', Greta wonders: 'how could I plant my stake in his heart without seeming insecure, possessive, a grasping imperialist?' (Quigley 1998: 12) They may use different tools, but both cut, reduce, contain the potential complexities of their relationship, because their 'other half' is so central to their own identity. It is not the ex-wife per se but the mirror she holds to Greta herself that renders their union untenable. The story ends with Greta on an evening bus heading north leaving her husband, returning to the muddy roots of her own history. Greta 'confesses' to the reader that she is not Greta at all, but 'Margaret McArdle from Palmerston North. […] There, I've said it. My secret is out' (Quigley 1998: 12). These little asides to the reader create a disingenuous intimacy that mocks our expectations of transparency and disclosure, and Alec himself remains 'in the dark'.

Like 'North of the Lights', New Zealand/Canadian film-maker Alison Maclean's short film *Kitchen Sink* (1989) combines Bluebeard with other fairy tales and more modern horror/thriller film references. Maclean draws on Bluebeard, Beauty and the Beast, and, like Cave, the myth of Pygmalion, in her depiction of a woman fashioning a man out of stifled desire in her dreary domestic space, pulling a stranger from the plughole of her kitchen sink. She bathes and shaves her man, but she cannot rid him of a single particularly stubborn and surreal hair. Maclean refigures the fairy tale significance of hair to represent the irreducible difference between the character and her self-made love and the impossibility of perfect romantic union, even in one's own fantasy-life. Compulsively pulling at the aberrant hair, the woman undoes the newly created possibility of conventional romantic coupling in the same way that Bluebeard's wife, despite herself, destroys the lucrative marriage she has just achieved. The plughole, referencing Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), again links creation and violence, while its circularity suggests the obsessive repetition that marks both romantic love and violence in contemporary popular culture. The hair, as an abject residue, indicates the impossibility of ever making the other entirely fit the image of our fear or desire, and the Bluebeard tale, as Tatar points out, is particularly apt for showing us how our fears and desires are deeply intertwined (2004: 10).

CONCLUSION

From the rock ballad to the thriller film, Bluebeard, in the works considered here, comes to suggests that the lover's ambivalent investment of self-identity in the realm of romantic relations fuels power-plays of violation and disclosure. The lover's epistemological quest is depicted in these works as an intrusive violence inflicted on the other by a self caught between the conflicted desires for self-preservation and self-dispersal. Campion's films in particular suggest the need to rework popular romantic discourse and narrative framing to propose an alternative model of love based in a more fluid and physical way of being and knowing. Sensual, anti-sentimental love stories such as these are confounding in a culture where popular representations of romantic love tend to oscillate between uncritical celebration and outright cynicism.

As the Canadian novelist and poet Anne Michaels in *Fugitive Pieces* writes (from the perspective of her male protagonist): 'For years corporeality made me believe in death. Now, inside Michaela yet watching her, death for the first time makes me believe in the body' (1998: 189). In these Australasian tales, death does make us believe in the body, and its fragmented parts are indeed fugitive pieces, paradoxically asserting the vitality of the material 'residue' that Millet's Bluebeard finds so fearful or disappointing. In this postmodern realm no body or text is safe, sacred or integral. If Bluebeard himself is refracted through diverse fictional appropriations and dismembered by academic criticism then his wife does not get a free pass either. And if the couples encountered in this article are anything to go by then Bluebeard and his wife – increasingly self-aware – are not entirely resistant to being 'reformed'.

Romantic mythology is not a veil that, when pulled away, reveals the truth of human relations. The works of Campion, Quigly and others emphasize the importance of continually retelling, revising and reinterpreting a shifting set of the stories that mould our expectations and experiences of romantic love. Narrative is powerful in these tales but it is not monolithic; it is, as Warner describes the Grimms' Bluebeard tale, 'Fitcher's Bird': 'a rummage bag of

scraps for the making of a patchwork quilt' (2005: 55). Postmodern Bluebeard reprisals (as both reiterations and retaliations) encourage us to sort through these scraps, to salvage and discard as we see fit. That this undertaking puts us in the place of the Bluebeard artist/lover is another irony of which contemporary Bluebeard is well aware.

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